

Patenttranslator's Blog

Diary of a Mad Patent Translator

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Do Different Languages Make People Think Differently?



This is a controversial issue in linguistics. Some linguists claim that, yes, some specific grammatical features of your language may make you perceive the world differently than how it is perceived by people who speak another language.

I don't really believe it at all, but as somebody who has not been able to speak his own native language on a regular basis for more than 30 years, or most of my life, I do know that certain rules of grammar of the language that I used to speak as a child and a young man, which are really the rules of this world for me, will stay with me until I die, regardless of the language that I happen to be speaking at the moment.

For example, certain animals are always associated in my brain with a certain gender, depending on the gender the word for this animal has in the Czech language, which consistently assigns to every noun one of 3 genders (he, she, or it). A hedgehog or a badger is always a "he", and a fox or a blue jay is always a "she" to me, unless specified otherwise. When somebody refers to a turtle as a "he", I find it somewhat ridiculous because a turtle will always be a "she" to me, unless the real gender of the turtle in question has been clearly established (which may not be an easy task). English is a strangely genderless language to me, as it must be to most people whose first language is for example French, German, or Russian.

Because I have been around Japanese people a lot in the last 30 years, I noticed that even when they speak English to me or to other people, they sometime ignore the rules of English grammar and import some handy features from their native language into the version of English that is spoken by many Japanese speakers in America. For instance, they may largely ignore articles, ignore or mix up singular and plural, or fail to make the distinction between the present and the future tense in English because none of these fairly clear characteristics of English grammar exists in Japanese.

Many Japanese people also import handy features of the Japanese language into their own version of English, presumably to make up for the many inadequacies of the bland and boring language that they are forced to speak in this country. I used to work for 3 Japanese companies in the nineteen eighties, two in San Francisco and one in Tokyo. All of the Japanese employees of those three companies were using expressive Japanese particles (*are!*, *yo!*, *chotto!*) in their English, especially women. Another interesting tidbit: when Japanese people talk among themselves and describe in Japanese the life in America, the generic term they sometime use for the word "Americans" is often "hakujin", which means "white people", although they do have the word "Americajin" (Americans) in Japanese. Incidentally, I also noticed that women are about ten times more likely to use an exclamation point in their e-mails than men, regardless of their native language. Women simply are more emotional than men. God must have made them that way for some reason.

I can think of quite a few interesting examples when Japanese speakers are importing patterns from Japanese grammar into their English: For example, they may say things like "between a house and a house" instead of "between two houses".

My wife has been speaking an ingenious mixture of English that is mixed with Japanese words, which she has been using to make the English language more understandable to me for the last 27 years. Although the Japanese language usually does not distinguish between singular and plural, it has a suffix ("*-tachi*") which indicates persons who are related to or somehow associated with another person. She would often refer to one of our (hated) neighbors who recently lost her house and moved away, (although not far enough as far as my wife is concerned), as "Jennifer-*tachi*", which means Jennifer, her husband and kids, her parents, and her current husband's parents, but not her previous husband or his family, I think.

One tricky feature of the English language, which still sometime confuses my wife after more than 30 years in America, is the strange counting system that is used in English for large numbers. When she says that a certain house costs 50 thousand dollars, I know that that house that she is referring to does not really cost 50 thousand because no house is that cheap anymore, but I have to ask a few questions first to establish whether she means five hundred thousand or five million. This is because one counts in Japanese just like in English until one reaches the magic number ten thousand (一十千, "*man*" in Japanese). One hundred thousand is "ju-*man*" (一十萬, or ten times "*man*" in Japanese), a million is "*hyaku-man*" (一十萬萬, or hundred times ten thousand).

So I would have to admit that, yes, different languages do make some people perceive the world somewhat differently. Personally, I don't quite understand why Old English got rid of genders and different declensions with different endings for nouns (Latin has 6 cases for nouns, and Czech has 7). I think it was a big mistake! You can tell quite easily which words belong together based on the endings of nouns in most languages, but not in English. John McWhorter, an American linguist

declensions and different cases for nouns when Vikings who stayed in England and married local women were learning the new language and simplified it in this manner so that it would look more like Old Norse. I think that he is probably right.

And as far my wife is concerned, the counting system where you go from a thousand to ten thousand, and then you have jump to a hundred thousand or a million and forget everything about the first ten thousand unit is simply too illogical when it is so much easier to use the "*man*" (ten thousand) unit for counting.

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